Home Life on Early Ranches of Southwest Texas

CHAPTER XIV

John Alexander Clark
Lavaca County

By MYRTLE MURRAY
District Agent, Extension Service
College Station, Texas

MRS. JOHN ALEXANDER CLARK

SINCE the days when Moses led the hosts of Israel across the Red Sea in search of a new home the people of the world have been searching for the "Promised Land." Almost immediately after Texas won her freedom from Mexico great hordes of homeseekers "sold out" and started to Texas—where free land was given each new settler. Then, as today, people everywhere were asking themselves, "How shall we better our fortunes?" Where shall we go to procure the necessities and some of the luxuries of life with greater ease? To lay by a competency for old age and an inheritance for our children? The answer, at that time, seemed to be "Texas Ho"—The Lone Star Republic. What magic! The human tide of homeseekers swept down from Kansas, Missouri, Kentucky, and states east of the Mississippi in great numbers. With courageous hearts and hope beaming from their eyes they failed to see the scalping knife of the savage foe that lurked in the uncharted forest, and the long period of pioneering in a new and strange land, where food would be limited and comforts few. To be sure, there was "Milk and Honey" if one brought with him cows and bee hives. The vast resources of Texas at that time were for the most part undiscovered and undeveloped.

Among the many families that came to Texas in 1837 was that of John Alexander Clark, bringing with him Margaret Lahn Clark, his second wife, and her two small children, and three of nine children by his first wife. He sold his land, on part of which St. Louis now stands, and put his money in a wooden chest. He loaded his money, baggage, and family on the boat and came to New Orleans. No one seems to know just how much money he had, but the chest was so full that the bottom fell out when the boat was unloaded at New Orleans. He then placed it in a sack.

After landing at Indianola, they came on to Lavaca county in an ox-drawn wagon. Here Mr. Clark bought a half league of land which is still owned by his grandchildren, and for which he paid $2,767. The deed was filed for record in Hallettsville on January 12, 1838.

He planned to engage in the cattle business and in farming. But the first thing to be done was to clear a place. This was done and a two-room house, made of hand-hewn logs, chinked and dobbed to keep the cold air out, was constructed.

Easy to Secure Food

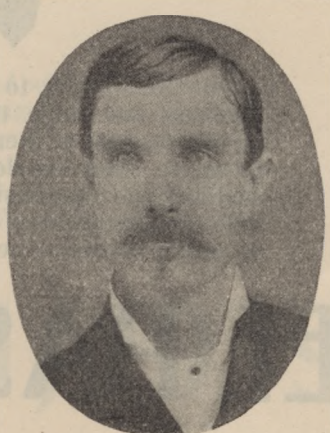
While Mr. Clark and his son, Wilson, cleared the land, Mrs. Clark was busy with her new home. She cooked on the open fireplace. In season there were plenty of fresh vegetables in the garden; plenty of chickens and eggs; and an abundance of hogs and beef. Fish could be caught in the river most any time. Beef was conserved by pickling and drying. Since they were only about three miles from the new town of Hallettsville, food was not so much a problem with them as it was with many of the early Texas families.

The Clark family did not bring slaves with them but bought some negro children expecting to "grow slaves." So while Mrs. Clark was rearing her own children and her step-children, she also had to care for the negro children. She carded the cotton, spun and wove the thread into material for clothing for the family. She made the clothes for the men folks as well as for herself and the smaller children. The materials were dyed with black jack bark and wild indigo.

In later years she had many hearty laughs about the first hats she made for Mr. Clark and the boys, braiding palmetto and sewing the braids together. She made the first one by starting at the brim of the hat and putting the edges of the braid over the other. When the first rain came, the 'hat leaked' and the water ran down on their faces. Later she learned to begin at the center of the crown and to place the edges under the top row of the braid so that the water rolled off instead of coming through.

She knitted all the socks and stockings for the family, did all of the washing and ironing, and made soap out of lye from the ashes. Mr. Clark was away much of the time, seeing after the cattle and she remained at home alone with the children. She kept a constant watch over them for fear they might be attacked by the Indians; however, they never were. The family had to make several runs from them. On one occasion they buried their meat in the ground, plowed over it to hide the hole. They went to the Sabine River where they were overtaken by Will and Tobe Douglas, who were also making their escape. The Indians had come to the Douglas home and killed their father and mother while these boys were out in the woods looking for the team.

At first, corn was the principal crop. After a few years, Mr. Clark took his son Alec and went to Mexico where he secured his first cattle. He bought ten cows for $5.00 each. This was a long and dangerous trip. One can imagine Mrs. Clark's joy when they returned. Mr. Clark frequently took Alec with him on trips. One time when they were in San Antonio, young Alec was exposed to smallpox. Mr. Clark knew that it would be impossible to secure help, and the nearest doctor to the Clark home was



HENRY CLARK
Youngest child of Mr. and Mrs. John Alexander Clark.

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in Columbus, about 40 miles away, over rough and frequently impassable roads. So he hired a nurse and brought the two of them home with him. The nurse took the pus from Alec's sores, or infestations, injected it in a cow, and then took the blood and vaccinated the other members of the family. They had variloid instead of smallpox.

Being so far away from a doctor, the pioneer mothers frequently had to resort to home remedies, many of which were quite effective. Some of them, however, were almost as disagreeable as the affliction. For general toning up of the body a tonic made of whisky, wild cherry bark, sarsaparilla and prickly-ash bark was subscribed; sulphur and molasses, or sassafras and sage teas were used to purify the blood.

Home Remedies Used

In the winter months when severe colds, grippe and pneumonia were prevalent some of the remedies were hoarhound syrup, liberally mixed with whisky, prescribed for a "hacking cough." To cure a deep-seated cold the patient was required to take a hot foot bath and go to bed, wearing over his chest a cloth soaked in turpentine, kerosene and grease. Asafetida suspended from a string tied about the neck was recommended for the prevention of contagious diseases, especially whooping cough. Tobacco juice was good for bites and stings; a mixture of baking soda and lard or molasses was good for burns.

There were very few educational opportunities for the children although a teacher was employed for a short time. But Mr. and Mrs Clark prided themselves on the fact they were all taught to work and to make an honest living.

They were members of the Methodist Church, and usually rode horseback several miles to attend church services at Rocky Creek.

Because of declarations by the Mexican Government to recapture Texas, filibustering expeditions were organized and made into Mexico. These steps led to retaliatory measures by the Mexican Government. In September, 1842, a Mexican force under the command of General Adrian Woll captured San Antonio. A few Texans escaped and carried the news through the Republic. A citizen army gathered and rallied toward San Antonio, among which was a group of men from Lavaca county, including Wilson Clark, John Alexander Clark's son by his first wife. They participated in the battle of Salado. General Woll retreated to the Rio Grande followed by the Texans as far as Rio Hondo where they engaged his forces in a running fight.

This second invasion within a year developed an intense war spirit, and preparations were made for counter attacks. Wilson Clark became a member of the Mier Expedition. On December 23, 1842, they reached the town of Mier, requisitioned food from the city authorities and took the alcalde and priest as hostages to their camp. During a battle on Christmas day Wilson was among those who surrendered to the Mexicans commanded by General Pedro Ampudia. Instead of being treated humanely and exchanged as agreed in their surrender, the prisoners were tied together in pairs and driven on foot toward Mexico City. Enroute the men attacked their guards and escaped. Within a short time, however, they were forced to surrender. Wilson Clark tried to get back to a

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waterhole he had passed on the march and was recaptured by the soldiers that guarded it.

As a punishment for their break for liberty seventeen men (each tenth man) were ordered to be shot. To decide which of them should be executed an earthen jar containing one hundred seventy-five beans, seventeen of which were black, were placed in an earthen jar. The jar was covered with a handkerchief so as to hide the color of the beans. The prisoners were lined up and each was compelled to draw out a bean as his name was called, until all the black beans had been drawn. When a bean was drawn it was handed to the officer and the jar well shaken before the dreaded lottery proceeded.

According to the story, Wilson Clark told his family, when his time came to draw he let the beans sift slowly through his fingers until only one remained, a white one. So elated was he over his good fortune he forgot his ailing leg and danced a jog.

Although he was fortunate to return home, those harrowing experiences were too much for his nerves. At times he would be wild and the family had to humor him until he could become calm again. But he was never normal and was a continuous hindrance. For instance he saw no reason why corn should be planted as long as there was corn in the crib.

When Mr. Clark died in 1857, Mrs. Clark was not only left alone with her own ten children, in a new country, but she also had the responsibility of Wilson. The older boys, however, were large enough to assume much of the responsibility of farming and managing the stock.

Four Sons in Confederacy

When the Civil War broke out four of the boys entered the Confederate Army. Mrs. Clark remained at home with the other children. The oldest boy at home, Stephen Austin, was only 12 years of age. Mrs Clark managed the cattle and farming and Stephen Austin did most of the plowing by holding the plow while his younger brother, Henry, rode the horse to guide it. Mrs. Clark took care of the house, tended the garden, and cared for the chickens.

The boys added a kitchen and dining room to the two-room log house. Mrs. Clark continued to live there until the last of her boys married. Then she lived with her daughter, Mrs. Margaret Bishop, until her death in 1891.

The boys continued to farm and manage their ever-growing herds. They went "up the trail" many times. Richard J. became the owner of the famous 44 Ranch, located in the corners of Lavaca, Dewitt, and Victoria counties. He was a close friend of Shanghai Pierce and other noted characters of that time.

Stephen Austin was equally as well known among the cattlemen. He died in 1935 where he lived on part of the original John Clark homestead. His daughters, Misses Kittie and Addie, from whom information for this story was secured, still live there.

Henry Clark, 83 years of age, the only living child of John and Margaret Clark, lives near the old home. He remembers going "up the trail" when it was sleeting and freezing most of the way. He kept one hand under the belt of his leggins, while with the other hand he held the reins between his frozen fingers. Although he is feeble, he still tends to the feeding of the stock around the place.